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# Understanding Sustainability: An Examination of Encoding and Decoding of Promotion Materials for Green Consumers

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**Understanding Sustainability: An Examination of Encoding and Decoding of  
Promotion Materials for Green Consumers**

A Thesis

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Muriel Paige Cross

March 26, 2012

**Title**

Understanding Sustainability: An Examination of Encoding and Decoding of Promotion Materials for Green Consumers

**Introduction**

Organic farming and foods, sustainable, *No Impact Man*, the “green movement,” “localvore,” *The Ominvore’s Dilemma*, and socially and environmentally conscious are all ways to describe a growing subculture concerned with keeping the world a healthy and livable place because of lifestyle, ecological or ethical reasons. Consumers connect with this issue for various reasons ranging from the personal, such as seeking out healthy options, to the social, such as environmentalism and sustainability. Marketers have embraced these consumers as a profitable market segment, as illustrated by the increasing number of organic brands and products in the market today. Three-fourths of U.S. consumers purchase organic products, according to The Hartman Group’s “Beyond Organic and Natural 2010” report. Due to the increased availability and interest in organic products, marketers now face the challenge of promoting these products to an increasingly diverse market segment in a dynamic and ever changing media environment. Placed in the context of Trader’s Point Creamery in Indianapolis, it is possible to observe the nature of communication in an increasingly complicated environment where there are many opportunities for a producer’s message to be interpreted by consumers differently than the producer intended. Using qualitative in-depth interviews with producers and consumers of green marketing materials, this study examines the producer and consumer encoding and decoding process in the context of a sustainable brand. This study also illustrates how communication has been complicated and how it can be difficult to understand why there are different interpretations of a producer’s message.



## **Literature Review**

### **The Communication Process**

The process of interpreting a producer's message has been studied many times previously and the process is outlined in models of communication that have been created and continuously revised. The traditional communication model explains how a message is communicated between people, or more specifically, producer and consumers. Harold Laswell (1948), described a linear model that defines communication as one-way, from sender to receiver. Hall (1973) defines this process as a group of "distinctive moments", which include encoding and decoding (p. 508). There is a process of meaning transmission that takes place in these models. Hall (1973) discusses the traditional model and argues, "If no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption'" (p. 508). Hall is saying that a consumer does not consume a message unless they interpret something from the message they are looking at. Essentially, interpretation is the main process of communication. Additionally, the field of experience for the producer and consumer must be similar for there to be meaning transferred and something to be interpreted. The field of experience includes the consumer's prior knowledge, experiences, or environment when they see or hear the message (Belch and Belch, 2007). This process of using their field of experience to interpret a message and give it meaning is called decoding. "It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect,' influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological, or behavioral consequences" (Hall, 1973 p. 509). When this occurs there is communication between producer and consumer according to the traditional model.

### **Today's Complicated Model**

Applying this process to strategic communication, without effective communication there can be no persuasion because persuasion depends on effective communication of meaningful information. Hall (1973) also says, "If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect" (p. 508). Hall reinforces the idea that meaning helps the communication have some sort of consequence for the consumer. Marketers care about persuasion because they want consumers to purchase their brand. However, marketers should not use this traditional model to understand how consumers respond to their communication without making adaptations to the model based on today's media environment. The linear nature and limited ability of the consumer to influence their own decoding process are limitations of this model in an increasingly complex communication environment. This model must be revised for different consumers and their individual field of experience and relationship to the consumer. Livingstone (1998) acknowledges the active viewer of media today and says that now there is emphasis on people's interpretive capabilities and "sees the process of interpretation as one of negotiation between a set of structured potentialities 'out there' and the person's repertoire of knowledge representations and processing strategies" (p. 33). She and others give credit to the consumer as being able to process media instead of being recipients of whatever message a marketer intended. This idea of a consumer as a "passive recipient" is a very simple explanation of a communication model. The current media environment means that this model has changed and adapted to reflect how consumers receive messages today. For example, the influence that other consumers have over meaning making means that communication is not straightforward. Littlejohn and Foss (2008) say, "Our shared understandings seem real because of the connection, or articulation, among several sources of verification" (p. 338). Often a simple communication



model does not suffice when there are outside influences such as other consumers that help determine what interpretation is correct.

In the current media environment there are many factors that influence a consumer's decoding of a message. Sometimes communication does not occur continuously. When consumers talk with other consumers there is other communication going on. Not all communication is like the traditional model suggests. Communication is not always linear, with a marketer determining a message and it being interpreted directly by a consumer, or uni-vocal, with only the marketer as determining the meaning that the consumer takes. Other aspects of the consumers' field of experience, such as culture, affect their decoding process. McCracken (1986) writes about how culture shapes the way meaning is transferred to consumers. He says, "Advertising works as a potential method of meaning transfer by bringing the consumer good and a representation of the culturally constituted world together within the frame of a particular advertisement" (p.74). McCracken is saying that the interpretation a consumer gets from a brand's communication is affected highly by their world and the culture it is made up of. McCracken's view is different than the traditional model because he recognizes the larger role that the consumer's environment plays in influencing their decoding process. Additionally, Hirschman and Thompson (1997) say:

The conception of the producing consumer requires a model of the relation between the meaning-encoding activities of producers and the meaning-decoding activities of consumers that is more complex than the traditional 'passive model,' which portrays the media consumer as a mere receptor of an ideological system. (p. 45)

A passive receptor is someone who has little influence over their interpretation of a communication message and consumers are not passive because they are influenced by a variety of factors. Hirschman and Thompson also acknowledge that the traditional model is

not an acceptable descriptor of how and why consumers attribute different meanings to communication.

To further debunk the idea that a consumer is a passive receiver of a message, there is the idea of polysemy. Puntoni (2010) addresses polysemy, which is why and how different interpretations for the same advertising message occur (p. 51). Polysemy occurs when a consumer decodes a message and “chances of observing disagreement on the meaning of an ad grow as interpretations increasingly rely on connotative meanings” (Puntoni, 2010, p.56). Puntoni is saying that the subjective meanings consumers get from the many connotative meanings of an ad increase the number of ways consumers perceive a message. Polysemy acknowledges the consumers’ ability to construct their own interpretation of a message, which can be a challenge for marketers. Basically, this more recent research suggests that marketers cannot fully control the message as a more univocal and linear model may suggest. Many communication scholars recognize that models of communication should be interactive and ones in which the marketers and consumers both participate actively (Wood, 2008, p. 14). The underlying factors for these complications in the communication process arise from the internet, social media, and new media such as user generated content and reviews.

A highly technological and globalized society is creating many more media channels and communication is now much more non-linear. There is an increasingly diverse audience perceiving messages in a diverse and complicated media environment. This diverse media environment is important to discuss because new media has allowed marketers to know their consumers in numerous new ways. The direct feedback that new media allows has created a loop of communication between producer and consumer. In fact, social media is ongoing, direct and almost instantaneous and allows consumers to be exposed to many sources. Livingstone (2002) addresses media as being more than a



channel and describes it, among other things, as an environment. She recognizes the interactional, relational and ritual possibilities of different media and sees media as framing communication as well as transmitting it (p. 10). Media and communication today are more than just simple ways to transmit a message and consumers are affected by many different factors when they interpret a message. They are as diverse as the media environment and marketers most likely experience difficulty in crafting effective messages.

### **A Green Consumer Subculture**

Because of growing diversity of consumers interested in sustainable consumption, marketers are looking to understand their underlying influences. There are many consumers who decode messages individually and create individual meanings. Due to this complex audience, it is necessary to ground any research study within particular subculture of consumption. Consumption describes how a consumer makes decisions based on their lifestyle and values and different kinds of consumers respond to marketing in different ways. This diverse audience includes “green” consumers, a small but growing group of consumers that care for the environment in their purchasing decisions. The communication model is also complicated in this situation due to the unique nature of “green” consumers. Craig-Lees (2002) says, “Since the 1970s marketers have been aware that there are clusters of consumers who restrict their consumption and who make market decisions for lifestyle, ethical and/or ecological reasons” (p. 188). As a feasible market segment, marketers and producers should better understand their backgrounds, motivations and choices in order to better market to them. As far as how these consumers are alike, there is a similar field of experience within this group of consumers because of their shared consumption patterns. However, the subculture is not homogeneous and there are variations within the consumers. In their study about levels of green commitment, McDonald, Oates, Alevizou, Young and Hwang, all students at various universities in the UK, write about the patterns in



green purchasing behavior. He acknowledges that even among a group of similar people, "each person must simply decide on the relative importance of different issues for themselves and act on this as best they can with the information available...". Each individual person is influenced in all situations they encounter, by the experiences they've had. There are many studies that define a green consumer and their multiple motives and levels of commitment to this form of consumption. McDonald et al., describe this group as "Ethical consumers' and for this to mean consumers who prefer products and services which do least damage to the environment as well as those which support forms of social justice". Cunningham and Anderson (1972) attribute some level of environmental consciousness to variables such as socioeconomic status, occupation and age of household head. They also say dogmatism, conservatism and cosmopolitanism play a role (p.30). Brooker (1976) compares a study done by Webster (1975) to Maslow's hierarchy of needs and says that the socially conscious consumer displays characteristics similar to self-actualizers and are autonomous, resisting enculturation and ruled by laws of their own character (p.108).

This is a growing and more visible segment where research still needs to be done to determine their characteristics and motivations to see how they decode messages in a meaningful way based on the many influences, lifestyle and background experiences and the complex communication environment. Attitudes and behaviors are intriguing and important in this segment. For these consumers, the idea of choice plays a large role because consumers can construct part of their identity from the fact that they consume in this way. Their motive may be lifestyle, ethics, ecological or any combination of those. There is the opportunity for many different consumer levels of value and meaning within this group and this study explores the different levels and meanings. This study addresses

the fact that the traditional model has been complicated and looks at encoding and decoding influences for both the producer and the consumer.

### **Methodology**

This study used inductive qualitative methods to gain the most meaningful information. This allows analysis of the responses of both producers and consumers for the underlying meaning they assign to the lifestyle. McCracken (1986) says that interviews “can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she lives the world” (1988, p.9). This method of conducting in-depth interviews is the best way to explore this topic because there are many slight nuances within these consumers and producers that this method allows individuals definitions for terms such as organic, green, sustainable and environmentally conscious. Qualitative research allows researchers to retrieve their experiences from the past and to understand their perspectives, among other things (Lindlof and Taylor, 2010). This is valuable data that sometimes cannot be retrieved if people are choosing from a pre-created list of options. There is a lot of consumer subjectivity and polysemic meanings among consumer’s interpretations of sustainability. This is the perfect mindset to have as both the consumer and producer are interviewed.

This study interviewed Trader’s Point communicators to see how they try and portray themselves and how they encoded their promotional messages to deliver a message to consumers. This study also conducted interviews of consumers who were attending fall farmer’s markets at Trader’s Point. These consumers were recruited with the intention of being interviewed at a later time. (Chart detailing individual consumers in Appendix A). This study examined consumers’ subjective interpretations of what it means to be socially conscious and how they perceive Trader’s Point. These consumer interviews helped to find the emic perspective. Emic is defined as becoming a person within the culture and really



getting into the consumer's mind (Emic and Etic Perspectives). Six, one-hour long interviews were conducted with consumers of varying age, background and lifestyle. Pseudonyms for the consumers have been used in this study in order to protect their identity. The interview guide was structured so as to elicit consumer insight regarding the different levels of meaning and commitment within this group that self-identifies with Trader's Point as socially conscious, what the source of information is (whether their knowledge base is more experience based than communication based), the typical media that a person reads, watches, sees or hears during a particular day, consumer interaction within the group, and the differences between the producer's intended message and the consumers' interpretations. They were transcribed, resulting in 35 pages of text, which served as the data for this interpretation. The analysis included identification of main themes for producers and each consumer and examined them individually and against each other. To more effectively examine the consumer's decoding process of the producer's message, actual Trader's Point promotional materials were used during the interview process. This helped to expose their process of decoding of the message. The main point of looking at a Trader's Point brochure was to discover more fully their decoding process with a specific promotional message in mind.

This study explored each consumer's individual decoding process and investigated what is meaningful about their personal experience with Trader's Point. Lindlof and Taylor (2010) say that when all of the aspects of qualitative communication research are put together, "these elements make the social construction of meaning virtually indistinguishable from 'communication'". Communication and the meaning consumers take from it based on their social experiences and backgrounds make in-depth interviews an effective way to elicit comprehensive explanations about consumer interpretations.

## Findings/Results

Among themes presented by Trader's Point Creamery producers and their consumers, various overlapping themes appeared. These are themes that were mentioned by both the producer and consumer and provided much of the background for the encoding and decoding decisions each group made. The themes that emerged about Trader's Point and its products included a heritage of farming and caring for the environment, health benefits of Trader's Point products and the atmosphere of community.

### *Caring for the Environment*

The first theme that connected the producer and consumers' field of experience was a heritage and pride in farming and caring for the environment. The producers, Trader's Point owners Jane and Fritz Elder, spoke a lot about their motivations for starting this company and the strong feelings they have regarding food and the future of farming. "We inherited this farm from my grandparents. It was always a dairy when they had it and so we decided that farming is a very noble thing, but if we're going to do it we have to do it with our heart... So organic was the only way we were going to go when we got into this," said Jane Elder. Their pride in the history of their farm combined with their concern for the future of the earth helped to shape their company into what it is today.

This care of the environment was also something that consumers cited as being important to them and a reason for shopping at Trader's Point. Being green and sustainable is also an important factor to consider in a consumer's encoding of Trader's Point communication. These consumers believe that living consciously is important to helping people and helping society. It is easy to understand how this allows for an accurate decoding of a producer's encoding, because their mindsets are almost exactly alike in this regard. Marjorie Langhorn, long time Trader's Point consumer says being sustainable is about "just living healthfully and being conscious." Ralph Cosby says that, "doing things



without pesticides and in a natural way is definitely better for your body and better for the soil and being more sustainable and for being more green.”

The strong similarities and overlap in field of experience of the producer and consumers is good when a message needs to be communicated effectively. However, there were still areas of disconnect in this theme. The point of disconnect was the level of green of the producer and consumers. Trader's Point is much more extreme than consumers which can be abrasive to consumers if the producers do not understand where their consumers' beliefs stand. For example, their difference of green commitment can be described by McDonald et al. Like the study mentions, levels of green consumption differentiate consumers, even within the same marketing subculture. As a level of green consumer, Trader's Point would be considered an Exceptor. “Exceptors are change-seeking. They see individual change and personal sacrifice as key to safeguarding the planet for future generations. They see themselves as rejecting many of the tenets of mainstream society and are comfortable with alternative products and outlets” (McDonald, et al). The producer's commitment to green and their background and experiences were major influencing factors that affected the way they communicate about their business. As for consumers, they were on the level of Translators. This group is green in some aspects of their lives and grey in others. They are not motivated by a political agenda, but by a sense of trying to do what they perceive is the right thing. This group is open to change, although they are not deliberately change-seeking... Once they have information however, they tend to be much less critical of it than the other groups, and will treat it in a straightforward way, implementing behaviour changes where they can see the impact of their actions (McDonald, et al). This is most of Trader's Point consumers. It is important to know the level of commitment to being “green” when considering encoding and decoding because some



shared field of experience in these regards is necessary for effective communication and the communication to mean something to the consumers.

### **Health Benefits**

The next theme that emerged as a similarity in the producers' and consumers' fields of experience was health benefits. This was something that was very important to Jane and Fritz and it is something they value in the products they produce. As farmers and business owners as well as marketers, Jane and Fritz are somewhat unique. The owners of this company are so passionate about changing the way consumers eat, that it's easy to see how that passion translates to all aspects of their business, including communicating their message to consumers. Their passion translates into a thorough description of the many benefits for consumers as well as an abundance of information in general. These producers speak in a scientific way and this translates to the language in their communication. Many of the health benefits Trader's Point touts have a very scientific spin. Trader's Point phrased why consumers should eat organic for their health as such: "Pesticides, herbicides, these endocrine disrupters that are causing much higher levels of breast cancer, infertility and endometriosis, prostate cancer that are even present in plastic bottles, baby bottles. Those are all unintended consequences of what we consider to be progress." This is why Trader's Point is such a big advocate for organic.

Consumers knew that these chemicals and conventional food treatments were bad for them and expressed similar concerns about their food. Trader's Point consumers had an understanding of the consequences of chemicals, but used different vocabulary than Trader's Point. They don't need a scientific description to know that conventional foods are healthier than processed foods. Amy Franklin said eating organic is important to her because "they are not chemically treated in my mind and so I feel much more confident serving those to my family than I would having others." Alice Little said, "But green, it's

really a way of looking at the world and it obviously extends to how we treat animals, and what chemicals are used to support our lifestyles and what happens to trash when you throw it away.” This is a positive alignment with Trader’s Point and their outlook on green lifestyles as a whole. There was a shared field of experience that included the desire for a lack of chemicals and pesticides in food.

Another branch of this theme was health of the individual and their reasoning for eating organic. Many consumers cited health and well being as a lifestyle habit that prompted them to shop for organic products.

I like to work out, so I’m really health conscious about what I put into my body and what I can get out of the foods I eat and the areas around and the air quality. In things like that I’m pretty particular. I consider myself pretty healthy for the most part. (Ralph Cosby)

More simply put by Amy Franklin, “I try to implement healthy eating, good lifestyle habits.” Many consumers may consider this a priority, but for Trader’s Point consumers, organic food is the way to be healthier. A healthy lifestyle is not limited to one aspect of their lives and includes eating, staying active and living with purpose. For this reason, Trader’s Point communication resonates with them. A survey by Mambo Sprouts Marketing released in November showed that consumers are “going back to basics to bolster their health” (Consumer Profile Facts). Consumers recognize food as a part of a healthy lifestyle and these particular consumers were fortunate enough to be aware of Trader’s Point and its products.

Health of the individual and health of the earth are areas of alignment between the producer’s and the consumer’s shared field of experience. The main difference in this theme among producer and consumer is the vocabulary and use of medical terms to describe the idea of health. It is an important concept to both the producer and consumer,



yet the producers have a much heavier scientific angle. One part of the brochure message says,

“Our milk from grass-fed Brown Swiss cows is rich with CLA (conjugated linoleic acid), a “good” fatty acid that has been shown to offer a host of health benefits, including lowering cholesterol and triglycerides, strengthening the immune system, lowering insulin resistance and enhancing muscle growth.” (Trader’s Point Creamery)

The consumers already have this understanding of Trader’s Point products being good for their health, but do not use the same language to describe it.

### **Community Connections**

The other main theme that connected the producer and consumers and their fields of experience is the atmosphere of community. For the producers it is the connection between their farm and the community, their farm and the consumer, and the consumers and the community. In fact, this idea of connection is one main idea that Trader’s Point Creamery promotes at their farm. They value reducing the disconnect between society and farmers through their products and in their communication. “I’ve always told people that lots of farming is done in very rural areas and so the average citizen doesn’t really run into a farmer or doesn’t run into farming practices very often so we’ve kind of disconnected as a community from farming yet we depend on the farmer to eat,” said Fritz Elder. They love that their marketing efforts create connections between farmers and consumers, as well as between consumers and other consumers. One way they use their marketing and their company to reduce disconnect is to communicate directly with their consumers. They chose to go farmer’s market to farmer’s market, and consumer to consumer to put the product in their hands and mouths, acting as spokespeople for the brand. “When we first started the company we couldn’t have thrown bottles on the shelf and expected them to sell.

We had to go out and put it in people's mouths, you know they had to taste it and connect to it. The farmers market has been an incredible communication device for us for getting up and running." This approach fosters a lot of word of mouth marketing, including consumer to consumer.

Consumers appreciate this and have formed a relationship with Trader's Point and appreciate the farm itself as well as the products it produces. For consumers, this atmosphere of community means several things. For some consumers it is the connection of being on a farm because they grew up somewhere similar. Growing up in the Midwest and in or around farms and food is one important aspect of a consumer's field of experience to consider when attempting to understand a consumer's decoding of Trader's Point's communication. Trader's Point promotes this food and person relationship as being an integral part of a person's food experience. A person who understands this connection to food is not only going to understand any communication highlighting it, they are going to see it as important when choosing a company to buy from. Because their field of experience involves farms, relating to communication about farming is more natural to them. Amy Franklin said, "My father was in the dairy business. They owned a dairy in downtown Indianapolis. So I've always been appreciative of fresh, local anything." She relates to Trader's Point and their communication because it is similar to her past experiences. She was used to getting food that did not have to travel far to get on her plate and now she can experience that again through Trader's Point.

Another way that consumers connect with Trader's Point is the community. For another consumer her connection to her food and the farmer was one of the reasons why she purchased her food at Trader's Point Creamery. "Obviously when you go to Trader's Point to their farmers market you're coming face to face with the person who grew that food and the food itself didn't travel very far to get to you and you're supporting someone's



livelihood directly,” said Alice Little. Connecting with her food through seeing the person who grew it was more important to her than shopping where food is shipped in and disconnected with the person who grew it. Trader’s Point also values this farmer and consumer relationship.

The last aspect of shared field of experience for producers and consumers is the atmosphere and soulfulness of the farm. Marjorie Langhorn said:

It’s a beautiful place to be, it’s outdoors, shows the connection between how our food is created. I think it’s good to know, and it’s healthful food, wonderful people who work there that are interested in the earth and other people’s well-being.

While the other themes had areas of disconnect, this theme does not. This highlights the importance of a farm community to both the producers and consumers.

Trader’s Point sums up this idea of atmosphere as well as many other points of agreement with their mission statement. “Our mission: to farm in harmony with the land and the animals; to produce the most nutritious and healthful product possible; to educate the community about farming and nutrition and to promote a community of local food and sustainable farming, reconnecting farmers and consumers” (Trader’s Point Creamery).

### **Interpretation of Marketing Materials**

In relation to the communication process, the backgrounds mentioned of the producer and consumers influence their encoding and decoding processes of the marketing material. It is important to understand consumers’ perceptions of the farm to see whether how they perceive the company aligns with the communication Trader’s Point Creamery creates about itself. Many perceptions of Trader’s Point Creamery as a whole emerged when consumers examined their brochure (available in Appendix B). Some of the brochure language did align with how Trader’s Point Creamery strives to present itself and some language created a distance between the producer and the consumer.



### **Shared Field of Experience- Shared Interpretation**

Many of the similarities between producer encoding and consumer decoding stemmed from the shared field of experience of the producer and consumer. The alignment of the understanding of the producer and consumer indicate a strength in Trader's Point Creamery's business and communication. Trader's Point Creamery's general understanding of who their consumer is and what is important to them is correct. They know that their consumer has a shared field of experience because of some of the language used, the importance of eating organic for their health and the whole experience of coming to the farm. The language used by Trader's Point is included in their mission. This is the simplest language in Trader's Point's brochure and is the part that consumers connected with the most. Consumers use similar words when describing Trader's Point. Because there is a connection between the words Trader's Point uses to describe itself and the words consumers use, there is some shared field of experience and some level of effective communication. Amy Franklin said, "I like simplicity and they offer that in their philosophy as well as their motto." This is language that a consumer must understand in order to relate to and as shown earlier, Trader's Point consumers have an idea of what "green" and other buzzwords mean in regards to sustainability. Their general understanding of green language helps them to connect with the brochure in this way.

Other aspects that consumers connected with in Trader's Point's brochure were the slogan "Fresh. Simple. Organic." and the images. Like the mission, the slogan is simple and uncluttered and connects with the values that Trader's Point consumers have. The images also connect with the consumers' values because of the consumers' fields of experience and their values of health and a farming community. Amy Franklin said, "I think it's the whole ambiance, whether it be in the barn or outside, their surroundings are fabulous. You look out and see green and cows and its reassuring." The images resonate and connect with

consumers because many of the consumers connected seeing a farm and green pastures with local, organic and healthy food.

### **Field of Experience Disconnect**

The major point of disconnect in the consumers decoding of the brochure was in the producer's choice of language. The way the producers communicate their vision has detrimental effects on consumers. The choice of describing health benefits isn't exactly the point of disconnect, but more the language they use to describe how the food is better for their bodies. The brochure highlights how "this marriage of medicine and farming has resulted in our focus on the health benefits of a grass-based dairy and an emphasis on health based products" (Trader's Point Creamery). However, the producer's highbrow idea of why consumers should eat their products and an over-emphasis on health is precisely the issue. This emphasis was a problem for most consumers. Consumers had different reasoning behind their choices. The brochure recognizes the cheeses accolades instead of its delicious flavor or uses. The highbrow idea of the appeal of their business was a main turnoff in Trader's Point's communication. One consumer expressed her confusion at the way Trader's Point Creamery products were described in their communication materials. "I know they are trying to give you information about pasteurized and not pasteurized, but I think it comes down to taste really. And you have to go taste and experience and the rest of this all kind of falls in," said Amy Franklin. Alice Little said, "In this case if you want some really good ice cream or cheese or yogurt, and you're just thinking about your own taste buds. That's one of the huge reasons to go to Traders Point." In Trader's Point's brochure, there is no mention of how tasty their products are and this is a major motivating factor for consumers. This is the biggest area of disconnect that Trader's Point has with their consumers. Trader's Point Creamery consumers already understand the benefits of eating this food and don't need preached to in order to influence their purchase decision. Instead,



they would rather read about something that reminds them of why they love Trader's Point Creamery products to begin with and communication that may convince their friends to shop there as well.

While looking at the brochure, Alice Little described what she would like to see instead of what she was actually reading. "What's missing here probably are people enjoying the place and the products." One thing identified as important to both the producer and the consumer is the atmosphere of the farm and the enjoyment and sense of community customers have when visiting. However, science somehow depletes the soulfulness of the farm and makes Trader's Point Creamery about something else that takes the emphasis off community and atmosphere. The science of the brochure takes away from what the consumers actually enjoy about the farm and their comments illustrate this. Trader's Point Creamery claims to be connected with their consumers and understand what makes them tick. Jane Elder described the text on their brochure and claimed, "Now this is kinda small and tedious and lots of words and all that, but once again we're dealing with a customer that is more highly educated probably, hungry for this exact message, and will read it and feel good." This was not the case when the consumers interviewed read the text. Much of the communication material from Trader's Point Creamery has a heavy scientific basis that the consumer actually didn't like. Lacie Knupp said, "I don't want to look at disease names I want to look at nice words." Much of their descriptive communication material reads very verbose because it is so much about what is important to them and not the consumer. The underlying reasons of health, the environment and sustainability for the consumer are what drive them to Trader's Point Creamery, but the reasons they communicate are so much simpler and less premeditated. Trader's Point Creamery has an understanding of why consumers purchase their products. The three areas of producer and consumer overlap in relation to Trader's Point indicate a shared understanding. Trader's

Point has a clear sense of who audience is, but despite attempts to relate, their message is still off target.

### **Discussion**

Based on a thorough understanding of who the producer is helps to explain why they encoded a message in a certain manner. Relating the consumer's background and outside influences to their interpretation of a message helps to make their decoding process clearer. Grounding all of these interpretations in research brings this study full circle and situates a greater understanding of a small subset of green consumers among the larger understanding of encoding and decoding as a whole.

The findings of this study showed that there was a connection of the producer's encoding and the consumers' decoding to a certain point. This study illustrates how a consumer's shared understanding contributes to a positive opinion of a message where as an area of disconnect creates a more negative opinion. For example, Hirschman and Thomas (1997) state that areas of disconnect create difficulty communicating effectively. "Our analysis is consistent with the communication research suggesting that the major obstacle to shared communication is the reader/consumer's adoption of a cultural frame of reference different from that preferred by the producer" (p. 57). This is significant because this study showed that the producer of Trader's Point and the consumers had some shared level of understanding before their area of disconnect. Because they still had disconnect within their areas of overlap, this study shows the growing complexity of the communication model today. A message from Trader's Point cannot be straightforward and simple, but is instead complicated by a consumer's frame of reference. Further, this study reinforced that the social milieu, experiences and interactions outside of Trader's Point, helped to shape the meaning consumers took from their communication. "The social milieu has the power to expose the consumer to an alternative reading and to prime a consumer



with the interpretive spectacles needed for the alternative reading” (Puntoni, 2010, p. 55). For Trader’s Point, these interpretive spectacles were often other consumers who shared their experiences and interpretations with others. Many times the message is secondary because it is not coming directly from the source and instead is another consumer’s interpretation of the actual message. Other times it was their own experiences. In today’s communication models, the consumer plays a much more active role, along with the producer, in order to create meaning. The consumers’ backgrounds and experiences played a major role in the positive or negative interpretation of Trader’s Point’s brochure. Hirschman and Thomas (1997) say that, “audience members bring to their viewing of mass media vehicles a wide range of unique personal experiences and a wealth of socially derived knowledge grounded in their occupation, gender, age, social class and ethnicity” (p. 45). This study reinforced this idea that background, interactions and experiences influence decoding of a message because each consumer was diverse and unique even though they all shopped at Trader’s Point. It is important to recognize these factors when communicating with green consumers because they respond differently to communication based on their general beliefs.

The findings also suggested a major weakness of Trader’s Point’s communication. At times Trader’s Point’s messages did not coincide because of language. Consumers were turned off by this because it took away from the idyllic picture of Trader’s Point in their mind and used complicated language to describe something that these consumers already understood. For core consumers, the power of their first hand experience with the brand does not deter them from shopping at Trader’s Point. Trader’s Point understand its main audience and works to connect with them. They do this by attempting to recognize the consumers already likely to purchase their products. Schlegelmilch (1996) says “In order to position their green products offerings, companies must first segment the market according



to levels of pro-environmental purchase behavior and then target the 'greener' consumer segments". Trader's Point recognizes that targeting the consumers that they know align with their mission and will purchase their products can be more effective. Trader's Point Creamery is not attempting to reach everyone and their communication tactics show they are not attempting to. "There are two ways, you can either educate the public or you can preach to the choir. And a small company has to sort of preach to the choir because educating the public is so incredibly expensive." This quote from Fritz illustrates why the producers feel that a small, targeted communication strategy is the approach they must take.

However, when you preach to the choir you have a lot of room to make mistakes without deterring customers. But yet even for these core customers, there was a strong reaction to the language in the brochure. This means that the general public will most likely have an even more negative reaction to the scientific language and medical jargon. What Trader's Point needs to recognize and may already know, is that preaching to the choir is not sustainable and for a company that says they want to grow. They need to find a way to make more skeptical consumers relate to their product. A more general brochure that features a friendly atmosphere, delicious food and a farm that grows the healthiest products is the most effective way to do that. Recrafting it's message could help Trader's Point move beyond the choir and get more potential customers to the farm.

### **Practical Applications**

Practical applications of this study would obviously be most beneficial for Trader's Point. I would suggest a revision of their most current brochure and possibly even their product labels. They also don't capitalize on social media, which is a shame considering their affluent audience and the capacity social media has for relatively instant and honest feedback. Feedback is an important part of the complicated communication model that

Trader's Point Creamery is part of. I would suggest a social media campaign that attempts to further connect with current customers, as well as help them expand to a larger audience. Based on the finding that consumers don't respond well to verbose health benefit descriptions, Trader's Point would probably make their consumers happier by reinforcing their purchase behavior through descriptions of the delicious product and less of why it is so good for them. The producer and consumer already have a shared field of experience when it comes to eating organic for health and so that aspect does not have to be emphasized so much. The larger implications of this study from a practical standpoint would include the benefits future small-green-business marketers would get from understanding the dynamics of their consumers. The understanding that these types of consumers rely heavily on their backgrounds and outside experiences is important for crafting an effective message.

Further research could be done to explore how non-"regulars" to Trader's Point decode the messages. This study was conducted with the company's core group of consumers to better illustrate the idea that Trader's Point has in their mind compared to its consumers. By looking the "regulars", this study highlighted the best way for Trader's Point to communicate to the audience it already has. It would be beneficial to Trader's Point to also conduct a study with consumers who don't already know about the company to see how their interpretations compare to the core consumers.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of green to society today makes a study that further explores this profitable market segment very beneficial. Understanding that these consumers differ from non-green consumers makes marketing to them a more manageable task. Their strong background, various experiences and many interactions among themselves are takeaways

that marketers can use to more effectively encode messages that consumers decode and take meaning from.



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## Appendix A: Consumer Profiles

<b>Ralph Cosby</b>	<b>Lacie Knupp</b>
Age 23	Age 27
Grew up in Midwest	Grew up in Indiana
Conservative family background	Lives and works at Trader's Point
Considers himself "health conscious"	Minimal media consumer
Enjoys cooking	Values high quality, minimally processed food
Values sports and staying active	Enjoys open, natural spaces
Sees "green" as a marketing ploy	Perceives farming as honest and wholesome
Prefers organic food without pesticides	
Social Media user	<b>Alice Little</b>
High Internet user	Age 31
	Grew up in a big Italian family
<b>Marjorie Langhorn</b>	Growing up, cooked a lot with family
Age 65	restaurant reviewer
Family raised cattle growing up	Enjoys nature/camping
Values personal growth	Lives in green test house
Trys to live with satisfaction and purpose	Sees "green" as a way of life
Lives a self-proclaimed alternative lifestyle	Values buying local for lesser impact
Values food that is chemical free	Describes herself as un-brand loyal
Values a connection with food	Currently boycotting Walmart
Has own organic garden	Values authenticity
Raises sheep and a donkey	High magazine consumer
Long-time Trader's Point consumer- since 2003	High movie consumer
High television consumer	Tries to stay unconnected
High Internet user	
High text/cell phone consumer	<b>Amy Franklin</b>
	Age 50
	Always lived in Indianapolis, IN
	Growing up, family owned a dairy farm
	Values locally made products
	Values food that is non chemincally treated and organic
	Values healthy family eating/lifestyle habits
	Values recycling/conserving energy
	High online shopper
	Low media consumer



# Appendix B: Trader's Point Creamery Brochure- Front/Back

## COME VISIT US

### Dine in our Loft Restaurant

100% organic grass-fed beef  
We pride ourselves in offering our guests the best in organic, seasonal, healthy food.

### Have a Treat at The Dairy Bar

Famous for our creamline artisan homemade organic ice cream, milkshakes, smoothies and yogurt treats.

### Take a Tour

Guided and self-guided tours available.  
Walk this beautiful working farm to see grazing pastures, milking parlor, production room and 19th century restored barns.

### Shop at our Year-Round Green Market

Support your local farmers and get the freshest seasonal organic products.

### Shop at Our Farm Store

We carry a complete line of award winning, organic, 100% grass-fed milk and dairy products. Open year-round.

## TRADER'S POINT CREAMERY

Fresh. Simple. Organic.

100% GRASSFED

9101 MOORE ROAD, ZIONSVILLE, IN 46077  
317.733.1700 • [www.traderspointcreamery.com](http://www.traderspointcreamery.com)

## OUR PRODUCTS

### Fleur de la Terre

Meaning "Blossom of the Land," our Fleur de la Terre is a mild and buttery aged cheese carrying a hint of sweet herbs and grasses grown on our rich bottom land.

### Trio of Fromage

This European-style farm cheese, made from milk, is perfect as a dip, spread, or as a base for a variety of gourmet dishes. Our trio of Fromage is available in Plain, Garden Herb and Spicy.

### Whole Milk

100% Grass-Fed, and Non-Homogenized, so you can savor the cream at the top!

### Chocolate Milk

A creamy, full-bodied, authentic Dutch chocolate milk.

### Yogurts

Our rich, creamy, drinkable yogurts are made in traditional European style with eight live cultures. Drink to your health!

### Creamline Artisan Ice Cream

Our one-of-a-kind, famous ice cream is hand-packed and made in small batches just for you.

Fresh. Simple. Organic.

## OUR MISSION

To farm in harmony with the land and the animals; to produce the most nutritious and healthful product possible; to educate the community about farming and nutrition and to promote a community of local food and sustainable farming, reconnecting farmers and consumers.

## TRADER'S POINT CREAMERY



## Appendix B: Trader's Point Creamery Brochure- Inside

nourish the land that nourishes us all nourish the land that nourishes us all nourish the land that nourishes us all

**2003**  
NOURISHING OUR COMMUNITY  
**TRADER'S POINT**  
CREAMERY

Trader's Point Creamery, founded in 2003, is a family-owned artisan dairy and creamery located in Zionsville, Indiana. We produce a range of certified organic dairy products from our herd of grass-fed Brown Swiss cows as well as from our sister farm in southern Indiana. As certified organic farms, we never use synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides on our land, nor do our cows receive antibiotics or hormones. The result is a family of delicious and pure dairy products: fresh 100% grass-fed creamline whole milk, chocolate milk, plain and fruit yogurt, and cheeses such as Fromage Blanc, cottage cheese and Fleur de la Terre, our raw milk natural-rind aged cheese made from 100% grass-fed milk. We're honored that the American Cheese Society has recognized both our whole milk yogurt and our cheese with First Place Awards.

*\*Our milk is certified organic by an independent certification authority, Indiana Certified Organic who verifies USDA standards. We do this so you don't have to worry about consuming products containing growth hormones or pesticides. We impose all requirements with rotational grazing systems and have been recognized as a 5-star dairy by the Cornucopia Institute.*

**THE SCIENCE BEHIND OUR MISSION**

We at Trader's Point Creamery strongly believe that cows raised on a grass-fed diet produce one of the most healthful foods known to man: milk. Cows are ruminants, which means their digestive systems are designed exclusively for a grass diet. When we try to alter what Mother Nature intended, we pay a penalty. In this case, the penalty is the compromised nutritional value of the milk. At Trader's Point, our goal is to reclaim the inherent benefits of milk. Our milk from grass-fed Brown Swiss cows is rich with CLA (conjugated linoleic acid), a "good" fatty acid that has been shown to offer a host of health benefits, including lowering cholesterol and triglycerides, strengthening the immune system, lowering insulin resistance and enhancing muscle growth. All milk has some CLA but milk from grass-fed cows like ours delivers significantly more healthful CLA than milk from

grain-fed cows. Peter F. Kunz, M.D., one of Trader's Point Creamery's owners, understands the linkage between nutrition and health. His studies have convinced him that grass-based dairy products do improve human health. This marriage of medicine and farming has resulted in our focus on the health benefits of a grass-based dairy, and an emphasis on health-based products.

*WE HAVE DISCOVERED JUST HOW IMPORTANT GRASSING ANIMALS ARE TO HUMAN HEALTH. WHEN ANIMALS ARE RAISED ON PASTURE AND EAT THEIR REGULAR DIETS, THEY ACQUIRE IMPORTANT NUTRIENTS THAT ARE VITAL TO OUR HEALTH AS WELL AS OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS, CONJUGATED LINOLEIC ACIDS (CLA), BETA-CAROTENE AND VITAMINS A AND D. WHEN PEOPLE EAT PRODUCTS SUCH AS MILK, MEAT AND EGGS FROM GRASS-FED ANIMALS, RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT THE RISK OF DIABETES, OBESITY, CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE AND CANCER IS REDUCED.*

— PETER F. KUNZ, M.D.

**FACTOID**

In milk, health-promoting omega-3 fatty acids, conjugated linoleic acids (CLA), beta-carotene and vitamins A and D are found in the fat or cream. For this reason, our products contain primarily whole milk. In addition, research has shown that you actually eat less calories when you eat the fat of nutritionally beneficial foods — consequently, restricting carbohydrates and increasing healthy fat in the diet is actually the best way to lose weight.

**HOW WE PROCESS OUR PRODUCTS**

We do not homogenize our milk because the process changes the fat molecules so they cannot separate as they naturally would. Homogenization has been linked to arterial damage, and some feel that it may be a primary cause of arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries). Because it's handled less and creates less damage to the fat molecules than homogenized milk, non-homogenized milk appears to be an easier-to-digest product for folks who are lactose intolerant.

Some people confuse homogenization with pasteurization. We do pasteurize our milk because we are required to do so by state law, but we pasteurize at the lowest temperature allowed by the law to maintain as much nutritional integrity as possible. We are also able to offer a raw milk cheese because it is aged for a minimum of 60 days. This ensures that there are no pathogens present in the cheese and is allowable by law.

**Fresh. Simple. Organic.**

nourish the land that nourishes us all nourish the land that nourishes us all nourish the land that nourishes us all